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EPISCOPAL CHURCH CENTER • 815 SECOND AVENUE • NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10017

H. Boyd, Press Officer
New Dearnaley, Assistant Press Officer

Telephone: (212) 867-8400

80207

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WORLD EVANGELISM CONFERENCE MEETS

by The Rev. Onell A. Soto

MELBOURNE, Australia -- A world conference on mission and evangelism called by the World Council of Churches ended here on May 25 with the approval of four lengthy papers outlining the responsibilities of the churches in the light of the general theme "Your Kingdom Come."

The 600 delegates and advisors from 82 countries struggled for two weeks on the contemporary meaning of the prayer for the coming of the kingdom.

The delegates were invited to participate in one of the four sections: Good News to the Poor, The Kingdom of God and Human Struggles, The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom and The Crucified Christ Challenges Human Power.

In a historical paper presented to the conference, Dr. Philip Potter, General Secretary of the World Council, recalled the start of the ecumenical missionary movement at the first conference on mission at Edinburgh in 1910.

He said that this conference paved the way for the setting up of the International Missionary Council in 1921 and in turn, the World Council of Churches in 1948.

Dr. Potter said that the Melbourne conference was designed to "deepen and further the commitment of the churches to mission and evangelism." He added: "The place of mission in the life of the Church must be the central place, and none other."

In 1961 the WCC and the International Missionary Council formed the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism which was responsible for the organization of this conference.

Dr. Emilio Castro, director of the Commission, challenged the delegates in a keynote address to "share our attempts to be faithful in our own different circumstances, bringing here the anguish and the glory of our respective crosses."

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He added that in the world mission of the Church each person and community must find the answer to his own missionary vocation but that the churches must search for answers together in the face of mounting world difficulties and opportunities. "We have a unique opportunity now to talk together, . . . to inspire, to challenge and to correct each other as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ," added Dr. Castro.

During the conference, the participants were able to gather in daily worship services according to different ecclesiastical traditions and to share their thoughts and insights in Bible studies in small groups.

A predominant note of the conference was the massive participation of people from the Third World. Only 20 percent came from Europe and North America. Also, for the first time in an ecumenical gathering of this nature, the input of the evangelicals was notable. Their contribution to the final papers is evident in the language used and the references to Scripture and witness.

The Orthodox and Anglican positions were also felt in the conference documents with references to the Eucharist as the central worship service of the Church.

In terms of regional groups, the delegation from Latin America was the most vocal -- also the youngest -- for active church participation in the political and social struggles of the people of that region. Roger Cabezas, a young Pentecostal pastor from Costa Rica said that "We cannot call ourselves Christians today unless we do share the suffering and anguish of the people who fight for their dignity and liberation all along Latin America." He added that the people of the Church must identify themselves with the poor as Jesus did.

Women from many countries of the world called for justice for women in the Church and society. In a statement delivered to the conference, the women pleaded for more voice and participation in the life of the Church and acknowledged the "unrecognized and invisible ministry" that women have rendered from the earliest times of the Christian church.

The statement called "The Vision of the Kingdom According to Women" said that Jesus affirmed the liberating action of the woman who annointed his feet and said that "It is time now that the Church become more like Jesus in its behavior and attitudes and involve more women who are dedicated to the spiritual and material support of the Kingdom of God."

The Rt. Rev. John V. Taylor, Anglican Bishop of Winchester and former General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, said in a paper delivered to the conference: "The ministers of the Church are the guardians of its evangelical truth and continuity but they must learn to be concerned with its uniformity. They must not turn the depositio fidei into an impositio."

He added that the Kingdom is not "something which can be given by one person to others; it can only be discovered."

Bishop Taylor also pointed out that when Church executives say that the Church must be indigenous everywhere they are "thinking too much in national characteristics and not enough of the cultural differences between people in different economic and social situations."

At a final press conference an international panel said that the "insights taken home from Melbourne" are power of the crucified Christ, the Gospel's call to minister to the poor and oppressed, the demand for new life styles for congregations and individuals and the concept of corporate sin in world and international relations.

The conference had more than 50 Anglican participants from various parts of the world. Those attending from the Episcopal Church in the United States were the Rt. Rev. Frank Cerveney, Bishop of Florida and the Rev. Onell A. Soto, Mission Information Officer at the Episcopal Church Center in New York.

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EXCERPTS FROM THE SECTIONS:

Good News to the Poor: "Although we have identified the poor in different contexts, we share a common conviction that God intends for all humanity to have both enough of material and cultural riches, and to have both a personal and social state of well-being. We feel that this is what our Lord meant when he said, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.'

"We must confess that we have heard of more places where the churches are indifferent to the situation of the poor or -- far worse -- actively allied with those forces which made them poor, while enjoying the fruits of the riches that have been accumulated at the expense of the poor.

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"If the churches are to be faithful disciples and living members of the body of Christ, they must be consistent in what they say, what they do and what they are."

The Kingdom of God and Human Struggles: "There is a temptation for churches or the established leadership and the influential in the churches to avoid confrontation with the struggles of this world on the grounds that the Kingdom of God is not of this world. The kingdom is not of this world but it is at hand precisely in a confrontation with the principalities and powers as has been clearly revealed to the Church in the life of Jesus Christ.

"A church that lives in a situation of injustice but is not able to discover in the light of the Gospel entrusted to it, the injustices within its own fellowship, is no longer an authentic sign of the kingdom of God. In many countries the struggles for liberation and self-determination have taken place outside the churches and even in spite of the churches.

"When Christians convert or change the patterns and structures of life in consumer societies their witness to the kingdom of God can be taken seriously. This is true also of missionaries who are sent out from consumer societies to developing countries."

The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom: "The Church witnesses to the coming of the kingdom in many ways. The proclamation of the Word of God is one such witness, distinct and indispensable.

"For the Church, the Eucharist is the constant reminder of God's grace in Christ which is beyond us, which is forever, but which, by the miracle of love, we are invited to share.

"It is not for the Church to assume the powers of the State; yet, the churches corporately and through their members must be involved in common witness and action in the political realm even when recognizing the ambiguities and the diverse views and solutions which may be proposed.

"All Christians live in hope, expecting the power of the Spirit to transform life until the kingdom comes in all its fulness."

The Crucified Christ Challenges Human Power: "The Christian missions are perceived by many as the accomplices of the colonial expansion. Too often the churches have taught a spirituality of patient submission, conditioning the oppressed to accept their situation. Non-believers were at times dominated by Christians.

"We intend that our repentance should lead, by the grace of our forgiving Lord, to amendment.

"Racism and other powers such as militarism, aggressive nationalism and super power ambitions continue to exert a demonic influence with an immense power of evil. How are we to confront them?

"Jesus' command 'do this. . . .' impels us to be faithful to the truth we have already been given. We do not need more words but the will, the grace and the courage to act. We know that such action will lead us to conflict with the powers of this world along the way of the crucified."

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